



Dek Unu Magazine

July 2023

The Lost Years

Laurie Freitag



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Eleven

This is Dek Unu Magazine. In Esperanto, dek unu means "eleven." Eleven images from a single artist. Eleven artists in eleven solo issues in each publication year. Dek Unu publishes the work of a new artist-photographer in each issue. The artist's work and words are featured in individual focus as the sole purpose for each issue of the magazine. Unlike other arts and letters magazines which might look for work from a variety of artists to support an editorial staff's theme, at Dek Unu, theme and imagery are always each artist's own.

This Month

Perhaps you remember the tire swing. It could be that your earliest memory is of the ice cream truck. For some of us, it's a traumatic event: the fire, the wreck, the new baby brother. Whatever the episode, if you remember it, it's most likely that it occurred after you were three or so years old. Most of us have only sketchy memories from early childhood; a more complete, adult-style autobiographical memory of events doesn't begin until age six or seven. Psychologists call the phenomenon, "childhood amnesia." This month's featured artist, Laurie Freitag, calls those "The Lost Years."

Freitag's photos of the children in her care capture moments from those years; the images become a sort of scrapbook of the kids' adventures, a record of what happened, to be reviewed when those moments are gone. But, unlike ordinary scrapbook pix, posed by parents and pictured by amateurs, Freitag's images, are made with the exquisite sense of timing, composition, and narrative of a pro. While the kids' family likely cherishes these images, it's an aesthetic experience for the rest of us. We don't need to know the family; the technical excellence, creativity, and humanity of these artworks touches something universal, educational, and beautiful.

As a nanny to a family for almost thirteen years, I was able to document many, many moments that comprise a life. This child, swinging upside down on the backyard swing, was taken on Day 34 of the shelter-in-place order (April 22, 2020) given by Governor Newsom of California. Luckily, the family had moved, just two months before Covid hit the United States, into a larger home with a large backyard in the hills just beneath Griffith Observatory in the Los Feliz neighborhood of Los Angeles.

There was a swing that hung from a coral tree that the children liked to swing from. This girl, who had been used to my photographing her, swung back and forth, back and forth. I lay down quickly in the grass and photographed her from the lowest angle I could get to as she passed near me.

Our world, by day 34 of the order, had certainly been turned upside down. As I saw the parents struggle to keep it together in what seemed like a bad sci-fi movie, it was important to continue the day-to-day tasks of life for the children. Who knew at this point that schools in California would be closed for in-person instruction for over a year?

Sheltering-in-Place: Day 34



Another photograph taken during Covid. When the child said, "My father doesn't like me to do this," I knew that I had to step out of my disciplinarian role and into my documentary role. He was only hanging on the rail for an instant and I quickly positioned myself against the wall behind me, hoping to not miss the shot. I felt compelled to capture this moment of utter whimsy because it would not be long before the child would no longer be the exact height to fit in this exact space between the railing and the steps. I wait for these moments of improvised joy, the impulses that children can't control. They don't see the hazards. That's my job. They believe they can do something and they just do it. After all my years (almost fifteen altogether) of being a nanny, my split-second judgment has become honed to decipher whether something is dangerous or not. My judgment as a nanny always comes before my desire to get the shot.

Climbing the Wall



In order to maintain a feeling of normalcy during Covid, the family that I nannied for organized an outdoor playgroup. Every week four-five children came over and got to do what five-year-olds do for a few hours twice a week. There was grass and lots of space in the large backyard to run around in. There were costumes and art and water-play. One parent was always there to assist if need be and I was lucky enough to be able to document it all with my iPhone 11 Pro Max. Children at this age seldom sit still and I caught this little girl swinging from a rope swing hanging low from the coral tree. She looked to be in a state of utter peace.

"A hallmark of Freitag's work is her anonymous point of view and the dynamic use of space within the frame. Each image makes visual sense as the center of attention is a singular piece of time marking the day-to-day lifestyle of young and oblivious participants in her stories."

Donna Cosentino
Photography Dept. Chair (retired 2018)
Palomar College

Director
The Photographer's Eye Gallery
Escondido, CA

The Cowgirl



Another image taken from the Covid playgroup. Most of the time, I followed the five children from one end of the very large yard to the other. Sometimes quickly, other times very quickly! This moment was just an instant as two children found a great hiding place inside a trimmed out leptospermum shrub. One child had another idea and was leaving. You can see his legs. The other child stayed perfectly still in a fetal position, instinctively getting in this position to protect himself. The shrub has pink flowers that bees love to munch on and though the bees were in fact buzzing around as the children crawled inside the shrub, the children and I, looked past that fact!

Hide-and-Seek



Young children “play” in their own worlds. She had come over to play with her friend, but she saw something better to do.

This particular girl is at home in her body. Not all children are. I have known this child since she was about two years old and she has never shied away from anything physical. She had neighbors that were gymnasts and, as a very young child, she would imitate them. I’ve never been able to capture her amazing ability to run...on all fours. I’m usually too taken with the actual feat to photograph it well.

Geometric Girl



Covid days. He went under the outdoor patio table, stuck his hand up through where the umbrella goes and said, "Look what I can do!" I was so excited to get this shot I remember scrambling to get my iPhone. Sometimes it would be nice if the darn thing was attached to my hand.

Another 30 Days: Safer at Home



This candid shot is of the first child I ever nannied.

With the sounds of "grown-up" all around him, what better place to seek refuge than inside this hammock?! A hammock is like a giant cradle. Who wouldn't want to be rocked or cradled? I actually did get inside with him later and it was a pretty funny sight as I tried to climb out!

It will be interesting to see if this child remembers this moment.

The Hammock



Two friends taking a walk up to the Griffith Observatory in Los Angeles. They wander off ahead of me not knowing where they're going but just following the path excited to see what is at the end of that path. I yell out, "Slow down, wait for me." Because of Covid, the Observatory is closed but we can walk around the perimeter.

There are great views of downtown Los Angeles and also the Pacific Ocean but children can't appreciate those views. They are more interested in finding a patch of grass where they can chase birds, which they did.

Up to the Clouds



It was a very windy day at Lake Balboa/Anthony C. Beilenson Park in the San Fernando Valley. The child didn't seem to mind the wind and was just happy to be at the playground where he could climb on play structures. My dry eyes got the best of me and I told him we had to go. He wasn't happy about leaving but, when I told him that the wind was really bothering my eyes, he agreed to go. He's really a good kid.

As we walked back to the car, I noticed small whitecaps on the lake. I knew, with the dramatic sky, these whitecaps, and a little boy watching it all, that it would make a great image. I told the boy that we had to go quickly down to the walkway near the water's edge to take a photograph. I knew by his reaction that he thought this was boring and I said, "Just stand there for a minute." He stood with his back to me and, one second later, he turned and walked towards me. I took one shot.

We left and it wasn't until much later that I saw something I hadn't seen when I got the shot. I was standing in the shadow of a tree and, because of the time of day, the shadow made the water and shadow look as if they were connected. The boy said it looked like he was walking on water.

Rough Seas



As he played in the backyard garden, hiding in and amongst the bushes and flowers, talking to himself about pirates or some such thing, I watched quietly.

"A list of art photographers concentrating on photographing children is not that extensive. Freitag's references are more Arthur Tress than Julie Blackmon, more Helen Levitt than Sally Mann, more Lewis Hine than Lewis Carroll. (The only other photographer who was a nanny, the posthumously famous Vivien Maier, who hardly gave a photographic damn about the children she babysat, doesn't count on this list.)"

Ellen Wallenstein
Professor of Art
Photography Department
Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, NY

Professor
BFA Photography & Video
MPS Digital Photography
School of Visual Arts, New York, NY

Elf in the Garden



"There is one image that always brings me back to the center of Laurie Freitag's monochrome work, *The Lost Years*. Titled 'Charley,' there is scarcely a thing at rest in this image. There's Charley the dog, wide-eyed, his tangled mane flying wildly against a sky streaked with clouds. Just behind Charley is a child in flight, toes lifted above the grass, determined face working to swing as hard and high as he can. In the background the only stable element is home but backs are to it. This is too much fun to think about anything but play...home is second fiddle.

"This photograph stops me every time and it's no wonder. Freitag's ability to halt the rhythms of a child's life, or at least slow them down, is the essence of this image and every image in this body of work. Her documentary style captures the fleeting moments of childhood unawares and more particularly unremembered."

Donna Cosentino
Photography Department Chair (retired 2018)
Palomar College

Director
The Photographer's Eye Gallery
Escondido, California

Charley



Artist Interview - Laurie Freitag

Early experience is often crucial. What about yours? Where does your road begin?

I thought if I had to answer this question, “Why am I a photographer?” one more time I would scream. I thought I had it all figured out but, for some reason, this time, when I dug deep, something new appeared. You get to be a certain age (67) and you think you have all the answers to your life... but when something unexpected bubbled up... boy, oh boy, that's exciting! So here's my story...



Laurie Freitag

I was born in the Bronx, New York. My family moved three times in 13 years in New York City and then we moved to Florida. While we were there, we moved twice.

When my sister was born, I was sent to Manhattan where I lived with my aunt's family for a month. I was 2 1/2 years old.

Saying hello and goodbye was ingrained into my soul at a young age.

Here comes the epiphany! "Holding on" to whatever I could, subconsciously, became important. Small wonder that I was drawn to photography – the ultimate in "holding on."

The holding on started, as I consciously remember, when I was about nine years old. I started young, collecting comic books and also saving letters and trinkets I was given. I'm still friends with people I was friends with in grade school and, though I didn't have children of my own, family is extremely important to me. So much so that, after a twenty-year career in TV news (behind the scenes), I found my true passion working in families as a nanny!

Other surprises or formative experiences early on?

My uncle lived with his family upstairs from ours in Far Rockaway, New York. He was a patient man and taught me how to tie my shoelaces and also how to tell time. He worked at GAF, a company in the sixties that distributed photographic gear including the cool 3-D View Master. My uncle took slides and family movies. My favorite times were when we got out that loud projector and watched home movies. I was just fascinated at seeing distant family when they were younger. There was nothing better than seeing real life captured and played back. I'm sure this, too, influenced my desire to take pictures.

You're a New Yorker, transplanted to Florida, who ended up in Los Angeles. What happened?

I left Florida in 1976 with a boyfriend. We both were working for a small UHF TV station in Hollywood, Florida, and the boyfriend wanted to travel to Los Angeles to try his hand at the big time. I ended up getting a job in TV much faster than he did because TV stations had to fill their quotas for hiring women.

When did you start photography? Was there a photo, influence, maybe a teacher, that started everything?

The cross-country road trip with my boyfriend to Los Angeles lasted five months. I bought myself a Nikkormat camera and shot mostly Kodachrome and Tri-X film. It may sound conceited, but I was a natural at composing and seeing light. I look at images now that I shot when I was 18 and they could have been shot yesterday.

My parents didn't support my desire to be a photographer and, when I asked for a camera as a child, I never got one. I think they were trying to steer me in a direction where I could make a decent living. But the one thing they did support was my addiction to a massive wall collage in my bedroom which consisted of photographs and text from magazines. I believe the time I took to find images that appealed to me and looking at that collage every day was my "schooling," where I learned composition and seeing light.

Your "day job" in TV news production lasted 20 years. What did you do? What did you like about it? Why did you stop?

I started working at KHJ-TV in Los Angeles. I was very young, 20, and I was the second female TV engineer hired. I was in a sea of much older men who weren't too happy that a young girl was doing the same job they were doing – projectionist, studio camera operator – and I wasn't too happy either because I wasn't used to being around men who had fought in wars and who enjoyed telling war stories.

I started work as a 35 and 16mm projectionist for the nightly news, then moved on to studio camera operator, videotape operator, and ultimately landed in the graphics department, where I found people I could relate to. They were the artists, the agitators, the quick-witted souls I longed to connect with.

I stayed and ultimately left after 20 years when I was offered a buyout. I was eager to leave because I just was not working in any kind of creative capacity.

At some point, each of us has waited for a “break,” a first sale, first show, first paying long-term gig. Yours?

I will never forget the surreal moment the morning I checked my email in 2015 to discover that Daniel Miller’s YourDailyPhotograph.com would include an image I submitted for sale the next day in their daily email.



YourDailyPhotograph.com is a source for international collectors of photographic prints and the fact that Daniel Miller and his curators chose my image felt like a giant step up from insignificance. I would go on to be included 12 more times. There are three images for sale daily and seeing one of my photographs for sale just beneath one by Sebastiao Salgado or Art Kane really made my day. I have gone on to be included in YourDailyPhotograph.com’s *HOT 100* for 2022 and 2023.

Photography is both vision and craft. You are expert at both. Where did you get your formal training?

I am mostly self-taught. When I was traveling cross country at 18, I stayed with a teacher who taught darkroom at Stony Brook University. I had a few tutorials with him at his home darkroom which made me want to have my own darkroom someday. When I landed in Los Angeles in 1977, I joined the Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies (LACPS) and used their darkrooms. And years later, when Alan's Lab in Hollywood closed, I bought one of their enlargers. It lived in my kitchen for many years but, after awhile, I lost interest.

I bounced in and out of putting in time with photography over the years. I traveled to Kauai and Greece with a group of teachers based out of Denver and those trips really ignited my love of photography again. I exhibited and placed at the LACPS but didn't have a sense of how to "make it" in the art world.

A greeting card company in Vancouver bought an image I shot in Venice, California. I worked for the *LA Reader* and photographed restaurant owners in their restaurants all over L.A. I worked for the *Hollywood Independent* newspaper and shot various stories.

There's plenty of culture and celebrity coverage in L.A. papers. Is there a story from your days as a news photographer?

I took a favorite photo of Sammy Davis Jr. when he was the Grand Marshall in the Hollywood Christmas Parade. The press was supposed to stay inside a roped-off area and, when a car carrying Sammy Davis Jr. pulled up, we were all together trying to get a picture of him.

Well, I decided to do something differently. I hopped over the rope and walked about 1/4 mile following alongside his car. I can't tell you the rush it was to hear the waves of cheering from the crowds on both sides of Hollywood Boulevard as Sammy Davis Jr.'s car approached! I took lots of photographs of him and I even have one image of him photographing and pointing to me from his car!



The Lost Years connects candid photography of kids to the best modern fine art and conceptual photography.

I have been working on the series for almost 15 years. It documents the years of childhood that most adults cannot remember, before the age of seven years old. Psychologists at Emory University demonstrated that age seven is when earliest memories tend to fade into oblivion, a phenomenon known as “childhood amnesia.” Emory psychologist, Patricia Bauer, says,

“Remembering yourself in the past is how you know who you are today.”

My work as a nanny and also as a fine art photographer of children has been influenced by the child-development pioneer Magda Gerber, an early childhood educator who resided in Los Angeles. Gerber is known for teaching parents and caregivers how to understand babies and interact with them respectfully from birth. Her principles were very popular in the years I nannied. Many parents were following her ideas of allowing babies, then later as children, to explore their environment, giving them free movement and uninterrupted play, giving them the opportunity to develop confidence and self-esteem. I loved this method because I just never was that photographer that wanted to pose a child. I wanted them to ignore me, which they did! It's only when they're a little older, around six, that they start to pose for the camera. I dread those days and try to photograph, as much as I can, in the years before that age.

The images brilliantly capture "decisive moments," especially noteworthy since you were often limited to just one exposure!

I know a good moment when I see it. I get really excited when a child is doing something that I organically know is going to be special. It all happens quickly. Capturing that moment feels like time stops and that is quite a feeling! My inspiration is organic and I trust my intuition implicitly. There is something inside me that says, "Click now!" and I just follow that directive.

You don't have time to fool with your camera. What do you use?

I've been shooting with the iPhone since 2020. Before that I had some kind of Samsung phone. Shooting with a phone is

just easier than a camera when you are trying to hold a kid's hand. Before the phone camera, I was using an aim-and-shoot Kodak camera. I really needed a workhorse camera... something that I could just place down quickly or put in my pocket.



Your post-processing, particularly your b/w conversion, is gorgeous. What happens in your "digital darkroom?"

I do all the work on my iPhone. I use the *Snapseed* app to change the image to black and white. I also alter the highlights, contrast, and shadows using this app too. I wait until I'm home and alone. I either turn the TV on or Alexa (jazz) and I get to work. It doesn't take very long. I'm able to see what the image needs and either it works or it doesn't. I try to have as little to do with my computer as possible. I have a situation where, when I blink, my eyes don't completely close so I have perpetual dry eyes.

You're represented by a gallery. How did that happen? What is it like to work with professionals?

The Susan Spiritus Gallery represents two bodies of work that I've done, *In the Garden at Chislehurst* and *We Are Stardust, We Are Golden*. Susan Spiritus was curating for the international competition, IPA (International Photography Awards) and she saw some new work that I had entered (*In the Garden at Chislehurst*). I had interviewed Susan a couple of years before so she knew me, virtually at least. The best part of working with Susan is that, if I have any questions about anything having to do with the photography world, she is available to give me the answers. She has been a leader in the field for 45 years and is quite revered. Her gallery handles works by such photographic luminaries as Ansel Adams, Ruth Bernhard, and George Tice.

Tell about your "side business." It's a wonderful resource to the photo community.

I have run [L.A. Photo Curator](#) and [N.Y. Photo Curator](#) since 2015. Both are platforms to promote fine art photographers through competitions four times a year with 10% of competition entry fees going to charity. The project has two missions: to promote emerging photographers and to fund great causes. Among the many causes we've supported are Doctors Without Borders, the United Nations Refugee Agency, the Assistance League (helping needy families and children), and Rising Star Music Fund (teaching music to special needs children). It's been really a joy to meet so many artists from around the world.

What's next in your plan? A book?

I would love to do a book of *The Lost Years*. I've been doing a lot of research and it seems to be a journey that involves lots of

patience to make it happen. There are so many considerations and, although I have had an offer from a small publisher to publish the book, I had to pass because the paper they use just wouldn't do a good job. Most publishers these days expect the artist to contribute most, if not all, of the money to publish the book so most artists have to have a kickstarter of some kind. I'm keeping my mind open that all will work out. If not this year, then maybe next!

Thanks so much, Laurie! How can we stay in touch?

Website: <https://lauriefreitag.com/>

Instagram: [@lauriefreitagphotography](https://www.instagram.com/lauriefreitagphotography)

Sales: yourdailyphotograph.com/collections/freitag-laurie

<https://www.susanspiritusgallery.com>

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